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## Judaism and Gays 101

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(1) First of all, just as a matter of courtesy please refer to what you call the Old Testament when speaking to a mixed religious group as The Hebrew Bible or the Tenakh. Obviously Jews do not believe

- (a) it is the "old" law as you state. As a matter of fact certain branches of Jews, primarily the Orthodox hold it to be THE LAW, in the same manner that fundamentalist Christians such as those in the Christian Coalition are trying in earnest to put God's law above civil law, and subvert the United States Constitution.
- (b) That Jesus was the messiah. That of course should be self-evident and I am certainly not going to debate that point with you. I never challenge someone else's religious beliefs if that is what gives them comfort.

(2) Certainly the matter of homosexuality in the Hebrew Bible is problematical. Non-Orthodox branches of Judaism, The Society of Secular Humanist Jews, The Reconstructionists, The Reform and the left wing of the Conservative movement, have developed or are developing later day commentaries on interpretations, which we call midrash, of the two passages in Leviticus and the one passage in Deuteronomy that refer to male-male sexual relations. Not once in the bible is female-female sex discussed at all. All other forms of sexual relations are discussed ad nauseum, there is certainly enough sex in the Bible to give it an R rating. The only reference in holy Jewish texts to what came to be called in the late 19th century, lesbianism (they were sapphists first), comes in the Talmud which are the Oral Law or the ancient rabbinic commentaries on the Tenakh, and comes centuries later, from Maimonides who had a lot of problems with women. The talmud is composed of the mishnah and the gemarrah which were written at different periods of time. Actually there are two talmuds but the one the vast majority of Jews pay attention to is the Babylonian Talmud written during the second diaspora (expulsion) after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

(3) What we now call homosexuality is contended by some Biblical interpreters to be unknown in the Hebrew bible. That is to say the concept of a loving relationship between two people of the same sex was not understood. The passages, and especially the most famous of them Leviticus 18:22, assume these practices are being performed by straight people.

(4) Moreover in these passages same sex relations are not called a sin. They are called depending on which translation you look at, either an abomination or abominable. The Hebrew word for abomination

which is To'evah is quite different in meaning from the Hebrew word for sin which is Zina. The Bible never refers in any of the passages as these acts being sins, merely abominations.

(5) It is because of that, and many biblical scholars are in agreement, that historically the prohibitions were not directed towards homosexuals but towards the cult prostitution practiced by the neighboring Canaanites who worshipped Ba'al and Astarte, two pagan Gods. The reason for sexual practices in these religions was typical - they were fertility rites meant to assure good crops, or a healthy child, etc.

(6) The passage which has caused so much pain to gay people through the centuries is Leviticus 18:22 "Man should not lie with a man, as one does with a woman, it is an abomination". Other things in Leviticus were also abominations, for instance, boiling a calf in its mother's milk, which was what led to all of the kashruth laws (Kosher), not mixing different fabrics (cotton and wool) into a garment, and several more.

(7) Now the Orthodox Jews, follow all of the Levitical codes, other Jews do not. Reform discarded most of them and the SHJ discarded ALL of them. What becomes problematical is when one picks and chooses. I know rabbis ( I know lots and lots of rabbis) who do not keep kosher, wear garments of mixed fabrics (which in today's society is virtually unavoidable), yet condemn gays. There is a lapse in logic here. At least the Orthodox and right wing Conservatives are being consistent. I have debated with these people on a number of occasions, and what you run up against ultimately is a tautology (circular reasoning) which cannot be argued against - "Because God said so". Well if God is perfect and God said so, there's no argument just blind obedience. What they always overlook is that the Talmud which they adhere to even more than the Tenakh, ARE interpretations of just exactly what does the Tenakh intend to say. It's kind of like Supreme Court deliberations over the meaning of the U.S. constitution. What they maintain is that the midrashim (the commentaries) are closed. There is no further discussion. The other branches maintain in one way or another that

- (a) ancient scholars were no wiser than modern scholars
- (b) modern scholars have more information available
- (c) commentaries never close.

The above is precisely why there is so much heated debate inter alia , between the different branches of Judaism over what is correct. Naturally it will never be resolved. Reform go one way and Orthodox go another. SHJ, Reform and Reconstructionism ordain gay and lesbian rabbis without restriction. The Jewish Theological Seminary (Conservative) asks that its homosexual students take a vow of celibacy, which is under heated debate, since straight students don't have that restriction, it's unenforceable unless there are bedroom police, and most importantly CELIBACY is not one of the tenets of Judaism.

Anyway I personally know at least a dozen gay and lesbian rabbis who could give far lengthier explanations than I could and probably point out some inadvertent errors I have made ( and I could go on for a few pages more as well, but I don't want to tax people's patience here.). The topic, it goes without saying, is controversial and problematic for a lot of people, such as an Orthodox Jew who

discovers early on in life that they are gay. How do they reconcile the two? Many times they don't. Some commit suicide. Others just leave religion. One tenet of Judaism is Choose life. Another is Justice, justice shall you pursue.

I am a member of the New York Federation of Reform Synagogues Jewish Gay and Lesbian Resource Committee, and we have a myriad of information on the subject as well as a speakers bureau. Please feel free to contact with me if you have any further questions on Judaism's position on homosexuality.

Have a wonderful Christmas, and everyone, please, PRAY FOR PEACE. L'shalom which is peace

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